

You Can Stop the Music!

Grandma's Proves Enforceability of Headphone Ban

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Everyone (or most of them) laughed last December when the USATF LDR committees passed Rule 144.3(b), which bans the use of headphones in sanctioned road races. "It's unenforceable," said veteran race organizer Mark Zenobia at the time. "It's the culture."

Well, as Bob Dylan once sang, the times they are a-changing. And perhaps it's appropriate that the first successful enforcement of the new rule at a major marathon came in Dylan's home state of Minnesota, at Grandma's Marathon in Duluth in mid-June.

Enforcing the Ban

According to Scott Keenan, who has directed Grandma's since its inception 31 years ago, the reason for Grandma's success in banning headphones was emphasis on another "E" word rather than "Enforcement"-in this case, "Education."

"We made every effort to be proactive, to let everyone know about our policy well before they got to the race," said Keenan. With notices prominently displayed on the race website and in all literature, "you couldn't come here and not know headphones weren't allowed," he says. The notice stated, "Runners should not bring these devices with them to the race. Those carrying/wearing these devices will be given the option to surrender their music device to a designated race official prior to entering the starting line gates. Surrendered devices will be properly packaged and mailed back to their rightful owners within two weeks after the race. Participants that choose not to surrender their device will be disqualified from the race and their finishing time will not appear in the official race results."

Keenan credits the media, including local papers and national publications, with giving the policy added publicity. "They did a tremendous job of getting the word out," he said, noting that Grandma's garnered extra coverage due to being the first to attempt to enforce the rule.

On race day, several volunteers, one of whom dubbed himself an "iPod Cop," stood at the entrance to the start corrals, looking for runners with headphones. According to that volunteer, only two runners at the start had been stopped and refused to surrender their music players.

In addition, the usual cadre of course marshals were instructed to watch for and note the bib numbers of headphone-wearing runners, as were workers at the finish line. The finish line workers' task was made easier by Grandma's use this year of single-use timing Chips; not having to collect Chips in the finish corral freed workers to watch for headphone violators.

In the end, they didn't find many. Out of 13,248 finishers in the marathon and accompanying half marathon and 5K, less than 40 were caught wearing headphones. These runners were sent notices saying their performances would be removed from the results, and were given a chance to appeal that decision. It is not known if any have chosen to do so.

Afterward, race officials and many runners lauded the decision. Due to unusually hot and humid conditions, many runners required medical attention during the course of the race, meaning ambulances had to enter the point-to-point route to get to them. The day after the race Keenan showed a photograph of an ambulance driving past a pack of runners who had moved out of its path (the author saw a similar incident at the 3-mile mark of the half marathon). "I doubt they would have moved out of the way as quickly if they'd been wearing headphones," said Keenan.

And while many runners expressed trepidation about going without the musical accompaniment and inspiration they'd grown accustomed to and perhaps dependent on during their training runs ("I hope I can make it without music," one young woman was overheard fretting on the bus ride to the half marathon start), in the end they felt going without was a good thing.

Afterward one of them wrote, "I am glad that iPods were banned. If they hadn't been, I most likely would have been plugged into mine, and would have missed the electricity, passion, and raw emotions from everyone around me."

Start of a Trend?

So, while Grandma's proved that enforcing the headphone ban is possible, the question now becomes, will it be done by other major races?

Grandma's downstate neighboring event, the Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon, had already announced that it would follow a policy and strategy similar to Grandma's, and the success of the Duluth event has only made them more optimistic that they are on the right track. Still to be seen, however, is what the "Big Three" of autumn American marathons-LaSalle Bank Chicago, Marine Corps, and ING New York City-will do.

Chicago director Carey Pinkowski stated that as a USATF-sanctioned event, his race will enforce the headphone ban. "It's a safety issue as much as anything," he said. "The primary means for officials to communicate with runners is verbally, and that's compromised when they are wearing headphones."

Rick Nealis, Marine Corps Marathon race director, espoused similar comments. "We plan to get this information out to our runners and continue to educate them about the rules of USATF," he wrote. "We will let our runners know the rules and regulations for participating in a large mass event could be different than anything they might have experienced prior to showing up on race day. We will win their hearts and minds so that they become true informed ambassadors of long distance running, and most importantly that they have a fantastic experience and stay with our sport.

"A large majority of our runners do not know about USATF or even what the competition rules are. That is what makes our sport so unique. On the start line at any given race you have the professionals, the runners, the joggers, the walkers, the athletes, the activists, and the competitors.

"We strive to create a safe and secure event. We will put all rules and regulations in proper perspective. The headphone ban is very important but it is just one of the many issues that we meet head-on each and every time we create an event. We must remember that our sporting events are also an entertainment event and both of these challenges must receive their equal scrutiny, or our sport as we know it today will be doomed."

Mary Wittenberg of the New York Road Runners said her event team is still formulating its final position on the ban. The NYRR is somewhat unique in that it produces dozens of other, smaller races throughout the year. "Enforcing the rule is a lot easier in the marathon," she says, noting the increased resources for that race and the fact that there is no shortage of runners trying to enter. "What we have to think about is having a degree of consistency."

Wittenberg says that some consistency is important among the individual large marathons as well. "If we can set a standard and example, it can give smaller events a precedent to follow."

Beth Shluger of the Hartford Marathon Foundation, which puts on a variety of events in and around Hartford, CT each year, has stated that her organization will follow that precedent and ban headphones at all their events starting in 2008. Shluger says that they will use the remainder of '07 to inform runners of the change for '08.

USATF Provides the Means

Jim Estes, Senior Manager of LDR/Marketing for USATF, feels that the rule is beneficial in that it gives race directors a rationale and tool for doing something many of them were in favor of anyway. "But no one wanted to come out and say 'no headphones' until there was a rule they could cite," he says. Estes likens enforcement of the rule from race to race to speed limit enforcement. "Sometimes you can go by a radar trap 10 miles over the speed limit and nothing happens. A different situation or a different cop and just a couple miles per hour over will get you a ticket."

Grandma's success in enforcing Rule 144.3(b), perhaps unexpected by some, has given other races a blueprint of how it can be done without a major reallocation of manpower or shift in logistics, and may make them more likely to follow suit. The question now is how many will do so, and to what degree. In Wittenberg's view, "what Grandma's accomplished certainly provides a lot of momentum."